

The Feldman Method of Art Criticism:

Is it Adequate for the Socially Concerned Art Educator?

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The structure and inherent values of the Feldman (1981) method of art criticism are debated in some art education circles. On one hand it is argued that the Feldman method, because of its emphasis on formal analysis, lends itself more readily to analytical formalist criticism, and is thus not an adequate instrument for socially concerned art educators. The other side of the debate has it that the method is appropriate for socially contextual interpretation when applied by socially concerned art educators. My thesis is that Feldman's method is well suited for socially contextual criticism of aesthetic forms. I intend to develop this thesis through examining the structure of the method, the context from which it has arisen including the general historical context, the propensities of Feldman's writings not directly related to art criticism, the ways in which Feldman has used the method, and finally through explication of my own socially-centered use of it.

A specific criticism I have heard is that the Feldman method isolates artworks from personal and public life through an excessive emphasis on formal analysis. This argument has it that the Feldman method emphasizes formal qualities and relationships even to the extent of incorporating a distinct and separate stage called formal analysis unlike, for example, the method developed by Ralph Smith (1968). Thus, it seems logical that a defense of the Feldman method as socially relevant should begin with an examination of its structure.

Behavioral scientists, formalist artists, and like creatures are fond of saying that the entities they have developed are value free. A given scientific method according to this view, is simply an instrument, a methodology, which in its essence is value free. Likewise, the formalist artist will tell us that his forms are essentially value free, that he is simply striving for some significant form, some ideal

relationship between the formal qualities developed in the work. I would have to take issue with this stance which holds that instruments and artifacts may be value free. At the root of any instrument or artifact, including a work of art, is the reason or reasons for its development. These reasons are basically values personified. The reason for the development of a rat trap is to catch a rat. This implies a definite prejudice against rats--a value judgment. The reason for the development of quantitative analysis is to consciously avoid being led by emotive/subjective/qualitative factors in analyzing whatever it is that is being analyzed. This shows, at root, a definite bias against qualitative judgments. Ironically, at its roots, such a system must begin with the qualitative judgment that the quantitative method is more fair, more equitable, in short more "scientific." Likewise, at the root of formally defined art forms, which profess to be socially neutral, is the concept of ideal or significant forms and relationships. One can only ask the question, ideal and significant according to whom, in what context, and with what psychological and social load? In short, it is my contention that there is no such thing as a neutral instrument or artifact; in fact, every instrument in being designed to do what it does has social and psychological values built into its structure. This includes the Feldman method of art criticism.

To some extent all systems of art criticism are social in nature. The very fact that the critic is talking about or writing about art-communicating discursively about visual form - defines the act as social. As Rosenberg (1966) presents it, the first requirement of any system of criticism is that it be relevant to the art under consideration. So whether the critic is discussing Delacroix's Liberty Leading the People, or Mondrian's Broadway Boogie Woogie, he is performing a social function simply by amplifying and clarifying values inherent in the visual forms. Taking this general and broad concept of social purpose, one could accurately say that any critical method which adequately explicates the values inherent in any given aesthetic form is socially defined.

In a narrower sense, however, it might be said that some methods lend themselves more adequately to one type of art or another because of the characteristics inherent in the methods' structures. One may focus

more on formal structure, another on psychological characterization, another on social interpretation, and so on. Professor Smith's method, for example, in its initial stages, allows for the inclusion of contextual material such as art historical information, which is excluded from the first stages of the Feldman method. Likewise, Smith's inclusion of characterization in the form of value laden adjectives and metaphorical language in analysis is avoided by the Feldman method. These appear to be rather fundamental differences which at first blush would lead one to believe Professor Smith to be more contextually oriented (thus more socially defined?) than Professor Feldman. Further evidence for this hypothesis might be gathered in finding that the Feldman method has an added stage of purely formal analysis unlike the Smith method. The evidence seems to imply that the Feldman method lends itself to formalist criticism, especially in comparison to the other dominant model currently being used in the field of art education. Furthermore, Clements (1979) would have us believe that neither of the dominant methods are adequate and that his inductive model is better in that it is "more respectful of personal sensibility" and "lets the hypothesis develop in a natural rather than an artificial way" (p. 69). Clements feels that the arbitrary division of description from formal analysis, and the separation of value laden statements from statements of incontestable fact is a "limiting, elementary, uninteresting and artificial way to begin." (p. 69)

Clements' assertion that mixing of categories mirrors the natural "rapidity and instability of total emotional reactions" (p. 30) may be true, but it has one logical flaw when applied to a theory of art criticism. Art criticism is a codified, systematized writing or speaking about art. It is not reaction as a sneeze is reaction to dust, as a howl of pain is reaction to something heavy being dropped on one's foot. Just as Dewey (1958) describes the difference between an impulse and its manifestation in a carefully crafted work of art (pp. 58-81) so the critic must go beyond reaction: he must utilize that reaction in a highly structured, carefully developed, linguistic interpretation of visual form. Sensitivity to the qualities directing reaction are crucial to successful criticism but I am not certain that an organically structured

(as opposed to organically perceived and felt) analysis is the most appropriate vehicle for revealing all the possibilities of those forms.

It is Feldman's (1981) contention that by consciously excluding art historical and other contextual information from the initial stages of description and formal analysis, and likewise by excluding value-laden statements from these stages, the critic is not deterred from making a complete and thorough analysis of the evidence (pp. 471-474). By avoiding metaphorical characterization, the critic is not drawn from the primary task of the first stages which is the collection of an inventory of evidence. Even John Dewey (1958), organist and pragmatist that he is, supports a two part structure in criticism of discrimination and synthesis (p. 310). Human beings devise systems of categorization in order to break down what is potentially to be known into manageable parts. This is an artificial system, to be sure, but in the same context so is the scientific method. The process of analysis, it seems to me, is much more efficiently accomplished by first collecting the facts, then finding how they fit together before attempting to attach values to them.

This still does not fully solve the problem raised earlier that indicates that because of an emphasis on formal qualities, the Feldman method seems to be less contextual, less human than, for example, the Smith method. The impression of social distance and disconnectedness is a false one which is quickly rectified when one examines Feldman's third stage of interpretation. Obviously, one has been collecting and categorizing evidence for some purpose. Although unstated by Feldman, obviously the "hook" which draws the critic to examine a work of art in the first place is an initial emotive/aesthetic response to its forms. Feldman (1981) states that "the information sought by the art critic is mainly about the sources of his satisfaction or about the bearing of the work on one's world and one's existence in it." (p. 457) One may be further assured that in this initial abstention from overt characterization and value judgments, the Feldman method is not intended to be leading us aimlessly through a fact-gathering jungle just for the sake of finding facts. Though once again this is not made overt in his writing, it is implicit that in gathering the facts one is constantly testing them against an initial reaction toward the development of a

hypothesis. This can be verified in the following quote about formal qualities in art. "Style," states Feldman (1981), "leads us to look for meanings beneath the subject matter and apparent purpose of a work. Just as handwriting conveys meanings which are not in the works alone, style reveals much about an artist's way of thinking about his environment, and about the society and culture in which his work is rooted." (p. 145) In the context of his writing, it becomes fairly apparent Feldman's emphasis on formal qualities is not simply to explicate the nature and value of form, but to ultimately use form to explicate the values of life.

It is in the third stage of interpretation that the critic is given free reign to bring his life experiences, his values, his expectations, his dreams and his desires to bear on the evidence collected. The Feldman method does not neglect contextualism, social, psychological, environmental, or otherwise; it simply delays such value judgments until all the evidence has been collected and weighed. This seems not only adequate for socially-defined criticism, but also superior to other existing methods in that it gives the critic less opportunity to miss evidence which may be critical to well grounded interpretation. As defined by Mittler (1982), any system of criticism emphasizes information given by the work, rather than giving information about the work which is the realm of art history (p. 36). There is no reason why one cannot, however, bring everything one knows to bear in interpretation, including information about the work, about the context of its making, about the tenor of its times, and about the nature of human beings. Interpretation, in the Feldman method is intended to go the direction in which the critic takes it, provided he continually refers back to the evidence provided by the work of art. The task of the critic is to clarify the meaning and values inherent in the work. If the work is socially-defined, the Feldman method is adequate for shedding light on those qualities which make it so.

The Feldman method does run into a little serious trouble at the stage of evaluation with those who would interpret the words "socially-defined" to mean socialist or anti-capitalist. Feldman's rationale for determining the significance of an art work tends to be hierarchial, placing one work above another. In developing this position, he refers to

the necessity for hierarchial ordering, among other reasons, in order to place a monetary value on a piece to satisfy the needs of the collector, connoisseur, and gallery and museum curators (pp. 456-458). This position has been criticized as being elitist and thus not socially defined, and indeed, may appear to be counter to the position of most socially concerned art educators. Being counter to the Social Caucus position does not, however, make the Feldman position socially irrelevant. In our western culture, at this point, whether one agrees with it or not, money is an (the?) epitomy of a socially agreed upon, thus socially-defined modus operandi. In capitalist society, money is a primary means of establishing and demarking not only pecuniary worth, but other kinds of worth as well. Many of the best things in life are not free. Because they are good, they cost money. Because they are excellent, they cost more money. The valuing of art works in a pecuniarily as well as intrinsically hierarchial manner, then, is, though somewhat circuitously, social evaluation. One may disagree with the system, with who does the evaluating and for what reasons, but in a capitalist society, hierarchial pecuniary evaluation is definitely a socially contextual process. The fact that a Frank Stella, Jackson Pollack, or Bridget Riley piece brings big money reflects the fact that even the formalist aesthetic is an agreed upon socially accepted way of functioning in some circles of society. Feldman understands this and is pragmatic in his incorporation of social reality into the development of his method.

A final point about structure is in order. I think an extremely powerful argument for socially defined consciousness within the method is the overall clarity and simplicity with which it was constructed. Because of the method's simplicity, the art of criticism becomes available to the masses unlike the more opaque philosophical approaches of Munro (1941), Beardsley (1982), Dewey (1958) and other aestheticians. In clearly and simply delineating a method, Feldman gives all of us the opportunity to critically examine works of art and make up our own minds as to content and quality, rather than having to rely on expert opinion. Freedom and social egalitarianism come to a society only to the extent that the critical judgments of the populace are their own, and not based on the perceptions, expectations, and values of an expert or authority.

Light may also be shed on the Feldman method by examining the context from which it has arisen, including historical sources. In addition, the content of Feldman's writing not directly concerned with art criticism may give us an idea of his philosophical propensities. The historian would call this a study of the method's provenance.

The most obvious place to begin looking are Feldman's books on art and art education. One simply has to examine the titles of the chapters in Becoming Human Through Art (1970) to begin to get a feeling for Feldman's deep and abiding concern for art as a reflection and manifestation of the human condition. Is there another general text in the field that devotes a whole chapter exclusively to the anthropological and historical dimensions of art? In that chapter Feldman describes the social, critical and anthropological aspects of art in detail, clearly defining connections between criticism as a search for meaning and aesthetic artifacts as vessels of cultural as well as aesthetic meaning which have developed from life (pp. 3-29). A more recent work which indicates that Feldman continues to explore the anthropological/sociological aspects of art is his book entitled The Artist (1982) in which he explores the nature of making art in different cultural settings and the nature of artists as different social types.

Other work by Feldman also indicates his socially defined inclination. In "A Socialist Critique of Art History in the USA" (1978), Feldman bemoans the notion of the preciousness of art as being measurable in pecuniary or in idiosyncratic and hedonistic terms. He also points out that works separated from their matrix in time are denatured and in danger of being examined by a type of criticism which Feldman describes as dehumanized formalism (p. 26). In this work Feldman also begins to develop his now familiar theme of art as work connected to a specific economic, social, and political context (pp. 26-27). This is hardly the stuff of a man inclined toward cool, formal positions in critical analysis. He concludes this piece by asking art historians to "show us the connections [between] artistic imagery and the social, moral, and economic dilemmas of [our] lives." (p. 28)

Following through with a concept of art as inherently contextual, Feldman brought us the AIM statement (1982a).¹ Feldman's statement of Art

in the Mainstream in which he states that art means work, language, and values was so contextually defined, that it set off a great number of reactions. An entire issue of Viewpoints (1984) was dedicated to responses to the AIM statement, all but one of which thought Feldman had gone too far. Feldman (1982c) carried on in the literature making such statements as, "there are moral and social values underlying the enterprise [of art instruction] that give meaning to our professional existence." (p. 99) At one point, Professor Smith (1982) entered the debate warning Feldman, from an essentialist point of view, not to lose sight of those aesthetic qualities which in the first instance define art as art (p. 18). Feldman (1982c) delivered a blistering response stating that instead of starting from assumptions about what is artistically valuable, as Smith suggested, "critical theory starts from assumptions about what is humanly significant." (p. 21) This is not the position of one who advocates formally defined art criticism.

Further evidence for Feldman as a social contextualist is found in examining the historical and contemporary figures who have influenced his thought. In personal correspondence (December 21, 1984), Feldman has indicated to me that one of his major influences was John Dewey. Certainly, the concern with the human condition as reflected in Dewey is also evident in Feldman. Among other influences mentioned are Ruskin (1958), Hauser (1951), and Panofsky (1955).

It seems that Pepper (1949) is closer to being a formalist than any of the others who have influenced Feldman in the development of his critical model, and may in fact be a primary contributor to Feldman's constructing a separate stage of formal analysis. Certainly as a group, however, these men that Feldman mentions as primary influences cannot be considered to be formalists in their approach to the visual arts.

The point that Feldman does not fall in the formalist tradition may be made even stronger by comparing him to a man not on the above list, a founder of formalism, Clive Bell (1958). Clive Bell articulated the formalist position when he stated that the one quality peculiar to all artworks is significant form. Significant form he defined as "the relations and combinations of lines and colors to produce an effect that is aesthetically moving." (p. 17) To be continually pointing out those

parts, the sum, or rather the combination, of which unite to produce significant form, is the function of criticism." (p. 18) He states in another place, "If the forms of a work of art are significant its provenance is irrelevant." (p. 33) Finally, he says that although "art owes nothing to life, life, indeed, owes a great deal to art." (p. 59) These are statements by the classic American formalist critic of the twentieth century. In light of these remarks, and those quoted from Feldman previously, those who would put Feldman in the formalist camp must have a very broad definition of formalism indeed! Another test of provenance may be made through an examination of how Feldman uses his own method. In Varieties of Visual Experience (1981), Feldman functions as a socially contextual critic. Rather than being chronologically ordered, as most art appreciation books are, Varieties is organized to reflect the context and social/psychological geneses of given aesthetic styles. At this point, it is well to make clear that socially concerned criticism, does not ignore formal qualities nor does it exclude formally expressivist works as a proper realm of examination. Rather, it includes a larger social/contextual dimension missing in either of the other two realms in its analysis. Obviously, the socially concerned critic cannot attach cognitively framed social meaning to the expressive works arising from cognitively subliminal roots such as Abstract Expressionism, Automatism, and so on. But the socially concerned critic may certainly comment on the nature of these images in the larger social context. Indeed, it is his duty to do so. In this context, we must regard Feldman admirably. Witness his passage in Varieties of Visual Experience on the development of the human image in painting and his attendant discussion of social meaning in relation to technical achievement and propensities in form (pp. 281-292). Feldman shares his discoveries about art as an extension of meanings arising from life, where art begins.

Finally, I want to interject a personal note into the argument of context, or provenance. Ed Feldman served as my dissertation co-advisor at the University of Georgia. My dissertation (Anderson, 1983), which utilized the Feldman method as a central component, focused on critically analyzing contemporary American street murals. For those who are unfamiliar with the street mural genre, the aesthetic and thematic

content is generally very socially oriented, usually quite a distance to the left of political center, and often instrumentalist in intent. Street murals usually reflect political subcultures. Feldman not only allowed me to tackle this subject but encouraged it. There were times, I will admit, when he would warn me that my dissertation should stay in the realm of art rather than center in sociology; but on reflection I understand that he was right in helping me define the aesthetic qualities which make art art, and not a social science. I adapted the Feldman method somewhat to fit my needs in critiquing this socially defined form. At the stages of interpretation and evaluation, I liberally inserted quotes from works that range from Tom Wolfe's Electric Kool Aid Acid Test (1969) to Edward Hassinger's The Rural Component of American Sociology (1978), to substantiate and support contextually oriented interpretations I had made. I did this with Feldman's (at least tacit) support and I believe overt blessing. As a socially concerned art educator and critic, I found the Feldman method and Feldman himself to be open to social contextualism and adaptable to my needs.

In short, it seems there is no lack of evidence to indicate that Feldman is, indeed, socially contextual in his approach to art criticism and to art education. It has been argued that the Feldman method of art criticism, which has been criticized as putting undo emphasis on formal analysis at the expense of socially defined interpretation, is very adequate as an instrument for the socially concerned art educator. It has been proposed that the stage of formal analysis ultimately contributes to a greater understanding of the forms which are the vehicle carrying not only aesthetic but also cultural meaning. Finally, it has been shown that the method has been used very successfully by Feldman and others to critique aesthetic forms in a culturally contextual manner. Thus, it is propounded that the Feldman method is an excellent instrument for critical analysis for the socially concerned art educator.

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